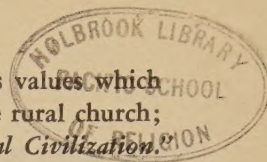


To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*



# The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin

Published by The Christian Rural Fellowship, 156 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, N. Y.

No. 181

March 1953

## AE—ADVOCATE OF COOPERATION

By Benson Y. Landis\*

"...God is the great Agitator, to Whose perfection stagnant and barren life is abhorrent" wrote that versatile Irishman, George W. Russell, known in the literary world by his pen name, AE. He was a poet, painter, editor, author, and an advocate of cooperation who appealed to men operating dairy barns. While in America he lectured on "the building up of a rural civilisation."

"The disease which has attacked the great industrial communities here and in America is a discontent with rural life. Nothing which has been done hitherto seems able to promote content.... What is required is the art of the political thinker, the imagination which creates a social order and adjusts it to human needs...."

"I might say to the American nation, Will you do the work your race set out to do? Your task is to truly democratise civilisation and its agencies, to spread in widest commonalty culture, comfort, intelligence and happiness, and to give to the average man those things which in an earlier age were the privileges of a few."

"The country is the fountain of the life and health of a race. And this organisation of the country people into co-operative communities will educate them and make them citizens in the true sense of the word, that is, people continually conscious of their identity of interest with those about them. It is by this conscious sense of solidarity of interest, which only the organised co-operative community can engender in modern times, that the higher achievements of humanity become possible. Religion has created this spirit at times--witness the majestic cathedrals the Middle Ages raised to manifest their faith."

Although his interests were numerous, there was "a harmonious variety" in his mind. AE could unite philosophizing with commendation for a professor

---

\* Dr. Benson Y. Landis is one of the best known names among rural churchmen. For many years he served as Secretary of the Committee on Town and Country which is now part of the Division of Home Missions of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. The quotations are taken from The Living Torch--AE, edited by Monk Gibbon, and used by kind permission of the publishers, The Macmillan Co. This book has been out of print since 1947.



who made a practical speech for a local farmers' co-operative. He perceived the rise of state regulation and controls in Europe but advocated their replacement by a vital voluntary life. He looked on Irish politics and wondered what forces turned the children of men in such contrary directions.

"But political action is the least important thing for us. The great thing for our movement to have is an ideal of its own to work towards. It is not what the State has done or can do which inspires, but the infinitely higher possibilities which arise through the voluntary co-operation of men to wring from Nature and life the utmost they can give.

"If farmers are to retain a surplus of wealth beyond the bare necessities of life, if they are ever to see in rural districts any of the comforts and luxuries of the city, they must make it their steady, persistent and fundamental policy to work towards complete control over the manufacture and sale of all the produce of the countryside.... I say that this policy is not against the interests of the towns, for anything which increases the wealth of farmers increases their power of consumption and makes the countryside a better market for articles which the townsman produces.

"To aim at the creation of a nobler social order in Ireland than we have had in the past might well give us all inspiration and energy, and make us feel that our movement occupies no mean place amongst those movements which are trying to regenerate our land. I would say, indeed, that all other movements, however necessary, are external and hollow compared with any movement which deals with life itself and tries to create conditions in which a higher humanity will be possible, and sets that before it as its aim."

When the Irish Statesman was refounded in 1923, everyone felt that AE ought to be the editor. This had come about by acquiring the Irish Homestead, which AE had edited since 1905, and merging it with the Statesman. Sir Horace Plunkett, the founder of the Irish Agricultural Organisation, wrote in Vol. I, No. 1, that the Statesman would not be primarily agricultural, but that it would continue to "stress the farm policy for which the Homestead stood.... In the application of the co-operative principle to agriculture, we have Ireland's chief practical contribution to world thought."

And so in the pages of the Statesman, published from 1923 to 1930, AE had a wide range indeed. He could lambaste bureaucrats, welcome a new Irish poet, give a boost to goat raising, and remind his readers of the primary importance of the Irish Agricultural Organisation--to organise and advise with farm co-operatives.

"I have talked a long while round and round the rural community, but I have not suggested how it is to be created. I am coming to that. It really cannot be created. It is a natural growth when the right seed is planted. Co-operation is the seed....

"So the first fundamental idea for reformers to get into their minds is that farmers, through their own co-operative organisations, must control the entire business connected with agriculture. There will not be so much objection to co-operative sale as to co-operative purchase



by the farmers. But one is as necessary as the other....

"The second proposition I lay down is that this necessary organisation work among the farmers must be carried on by an organising body which is entirely controlled by those interested in agriculture--farmers and their friends. To ask the State or a state department to undertake this work is to ask a body influenced and often controlled by powerful capitalists and middle agencies, which it should be the aim of the organisation to eliminate. The State can, without obstruction from any quarter, give farmers a technical education in the science of farming; but let it once interfere with business, and a horde of angry interests set to work to hamper and limit by every possible means; and compromises on matters of principle, where no compromise ought to be permitted, are almost inevitable."

One problem in publishing periodicals is an ancient one--the editor has to write too much of the stuff to fill the pages. Thus it was said of AE that he wrote faster than men flew through the air. He did not want to sign all the items with his own name and neither did he want to leave many of them unsigned. The way out was a number of pen names; sometimes several were used in one issue. One such name chosen was "Aeon." A typesetter made an error and the proof simply carried the initials AE. The editor let it stand; it went into circulation and stuck! Some thought for a time that it stood for agricultural economics. AE read and wrote in the realm of economics and was called an economist, but he never made any professions in the realm of professional economics.

AE thought the Menlough Co-operative was "working on the right lines"--practising local curing of bacon and local milling of grain locally grown. He carried stories of tractor demonstrations and advertisements of "motor ploughs." In 1918, according to the Homestead, all co-operatives in Ireland had a turnover of about 50,000,000 pounds. The seasonal arrival of seed catalogs was deserving of an editorial note. Observed AE, "Man is an infinitely taxable animal." And again, "Even if the old civilisation is dying we need not necessarily despair."

In a letter to Van Wyck Brooks, the American author, he wrote as follows in 1926. AE lived to 1935.

"I fear we are in for an era of materialism. Our new government is, however, honest and energetic, and from a romantic conception of Ireland is being unrolled the idea of a highly efficient modern state. I should like to live fifteen years more, because I think we will react again to the imaginative and spiritual, and we shall probably begin a fight for spiritual freedom. But Ireland is a very small and unimportant part of the planet, and I don't share the egomania of my countrymen who think the whole world is staring at them. But it is a lovely country to live in."

AE seems to have had little experience with organised religion. He came to Dublin from North Ireland Protestant parents. He had incomplete schooling. Yet here was "a boy whose voice was soon to be the most beautiful voice in Irish literature." He was at first pretty much alone in the adventures of his own spirit. Later he joined a theosophy group and remained within it, although he would not call himself a theosophist. AE used to say he was without religion, but those who knew him thought he was essentially religious and that his whole



being expressed well the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. On various occasions he wrote:

"If our life has depths, if love has discovered its own spiritual roots, our own experience will, I think, stir us more deeply than anything in legend, anything in poetry, because we live poetry rather than read it."

"The highest virtue is wisdom, and wisdom is the right relation of our own being to That in which we live, and move, and have our own being."

"The universe exists for the purposes of the soul."

"We are quite sure any Devil would be well content to make a treaty with the Church, leaving it a free hand in the realm of the spiritual and cultural, if he was allowed a free hand in the realm of the economic."

Although AE dissented from Roman Catholic principles, he was always working among Roman Catholic farmers. Of him a Catholic could write, "He is of the world unworldly--the world's stain has never touched him. Without religion, yet profoundly religious; the peace of God which passes understanding lies all about him.... He finds God in the earth and air--rather I would say he finds God and his life unconsciously has cast incense on the altars of the Unknown God."

As informal advisor of statesmen in Ireland and the United States, AE was generous, simple, magnanimous. He carried no surplus baggage, and there was always something of the Franciscan about him. If he was a visionary and a mystic, he also believed that the eternal forces should motivate material life, and he searched for arrangements on earth that would encourage men in such dreams as he dreamed. Sir Horace Plunkett summed him up as a "wonderful mixture of seer, artist, poet, philosopher and economist."

William Butler Yeats, a contemporary of AE's, thought these lines from "Dusk" were his best:

Dusk wraps the village in its dim caress;  
Each chimney's vapour, like a thin grey rod,  
Mounting aloft through miles of quietness,  
Pillars the skies of God.

\* \* \*  
\* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \* \* \*  
\* \* \*  
\* \* \*  
\* \* \*  
\* \* \*